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POLITICS & POLICY

# The Roots of Left-Wing Violence

By **IAN TUTTLE** | June 5, 2017 8:00 AM

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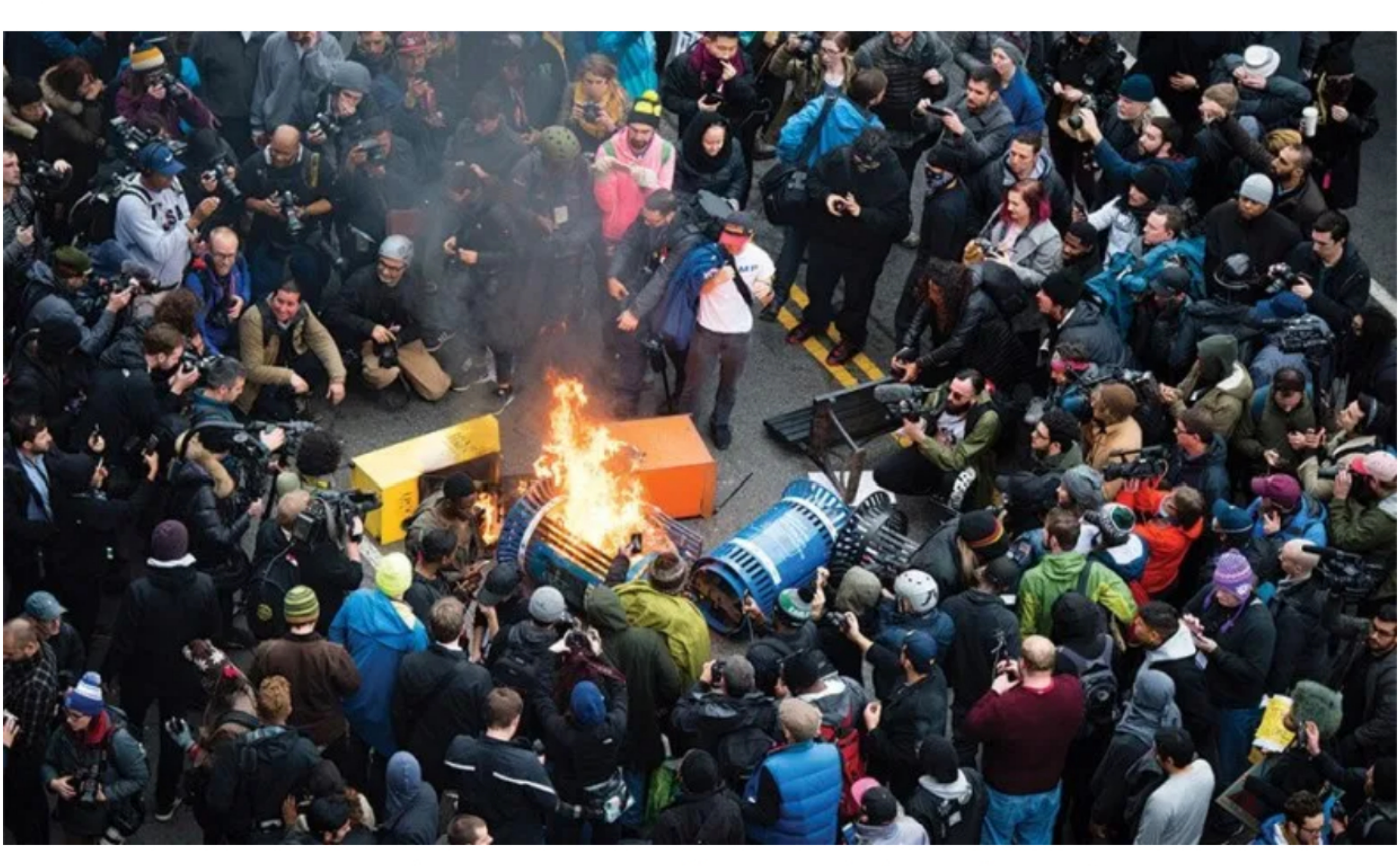

Rioters in Washington, D.C., on Inauguration Day (Photo: Sara L. Voisin/Washington Post/Getty Images)

## A vague and dangerous ideology

There is currently, on the streets, smashing storefronts and setting things on fire, a group called "Antifa," for "anti-fascist." Antifa are not a new phenomenon; they surfaced during the Occupy movement, and during the anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Antifa movements began in early-20th-century Europe, when fascism was a concrete and urgent concern, and they remain active on the Continent. Lately, Antifa have emerged as the militant fringe of #TheResistance against Donald Trump — who, they maintain, is a fascist, ushering into power a fascist regime. In Washington, D.C., Antifa spent the morning of Inauguration Day lighting trash cans on fire, throwing rocks and bottles at police officers, setting ablaze a limousine, and tossing chunks of pavement through the windows of several businesses. On February 1, Antifa set fires and stormed buildings at the University of California–Berkeley to prevent an appearance by *Breitbart* provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos. (They succeeded.) In April, they threatened violence if Ann Coulter spoke on the campus; when the university and local law enforcement refused to find a secure location for her to speak, she withdrew, saying the situation was too dangerous.

These and similar episodes call to mind Woody Allen's character's observation in the 1979 film *Manhattan*: "A satirical piece in the *Times* is one thing, but bricks and baseball bats really gets right to the point of it."

All politics is, at some level, a vocabulary contest, and it happens that American politics is currently engaged in a fierce fight over, and about, words. The central word at issue is "fascist," but there are others: "racist," "sexist," and the like. A great many people are currently involved in a turf war, aiming to stake out conceptual territory for these charged words: What is fascism? What isn't it?

An illustration: In April, Heather Mac Donald was physically blocked from an auditorium at Claremont McKenna College, in Claremont, Calif., where she was scheduled to speak. Mac Donald is a scholar at the Manhattan Institute, a prominent right-of-center think tank. She is a noted expert on law enforcement, especially the complex relationship between law enforcement and minority communities. She was among the first to theorize that anti-police protests in Ferguson, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and elsewhere have facilitated an increase in urban crime; the so-called Ferguson Effect is now a matter of consensus among experts on both the left and the right. NATIONAL REVIEW readers will be well acquainted with Mac Donald; she publishes in these pages regularly.

A group of students from Pomona College, part of the consortium of Claremont schools, penned a letter to Pomona president David Oxtoby, affirming the protest at their sister institution. Mac Donald, they wrote, should not be permitted to speak; she is "a fascist, a white supremacist, a warhawk, a transphobe, a queerphobe, a classist, and ignorant of interlocking systems of domination that produce the lethal conditions under which oppressed peoples are forced to live." Mac Donald was not offering any material for substantive intellectual discussion; she was, they claimed, challenging "the right of Black people to exist."

The last is, to those who are familiar with Mac Donald's work, an odd charge. Among her central claims is that the reluctance of law enforcement to police minority communities has disproportionately affected those same communities; more young black men are being killed by St. Louis PD's hands-off approach than were being killed by "proactive policing." Mac Donald does not oppose "the right of Black people to exist"; she maintains that it is being threatened by militant anti-police sentiment.

But substantiating accusations that Mac Donald is a "fascist, a white supremacist," etc., is not the point. The point is finding charged language to signify that Mac Donald ought to be *persona non grata*, without needing to prove the case. The outraged undergraduates of Pomona College and Antifa are different in only one regard, albeit an important one: Antifa are willing to employ muscle to achieve their ends.

The purpose of words is, the philosopher Josef Pieper suggested, "to convey reality." But it is clear that, for Antifa, the purpose is to cloak reality. Antifa's reason for describing something or someone as "fascist" is not that it is actually fascist (although perhaps on occasion they do stumble onto the genuine item), but that describing it that way is politically advantageous. Likewise with any number of other slurs. Antifa are in effect claiming to oppose everything that is bad — and, of course, it is Antifa who decide what is bad. Hence the organizers of the Inauguration Day protests could write, as their mission statement, that "#DisruptJ20 rejects all forms of domination and oppression." That is a good monopoly if you can get it.

Roger Scruton, in *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism* (2006), examines how the manipulation of language facilitated the Communist enterprise and its myriad evils:

> Who and what am I? Who and what are you? Those are the questions that plagued the Russian romantics, and to which they produced answers that mean nothing in themselves, but which dictated the fate of those to whom they were applied: . . . bourgeoisie and proletariat; capitalist and socialist; exploiter and producer: and all with the simple and glorious meaning of them and us!

What George Orwell called "Newspeak" in his novel *1984* "occurs whenever the main purpose of language — which is to describe reality — is replaced by the rival purpose of asserting power over it." The latter is the purpose of "anti-fascism." Who and what are you? A fascist. Who and what am I? An anti-fascist. Them and us, tidily distinguished.

Reality shapes language, but language also shapes reality. We think by means of words. Our perceptions change as the words change, and our actions often follow. Back to the Communists: No one killed affluent peasants. The Party "liquidated kulaks."

Using words to cloak reality makes it easier to dispose of that reality. Antifa are not satisfied with labeling people fascists; they want them to bleed on that account. On Inauguration Day, in Washington, D.C., an Antifa rioter sucker-punched white nationalist Richard Spencer. Spencer is as near to a prominent fascist as one will find in the United States today, and a bona fide racist (an Antifa twofer). But the imperative of anti-fascism, to reject "all forms of domination and oppression," applies by anti-fascists' own inexorable logic no less to Heather Mac Donald — or to the Republicans of Multnomah County, whom Antifa threatened to physically assault if they were permitted to participate as usual in the annual Portland Rose Festival parade. Why not punch them, too?

At *The Nation* in January, Natasha Lennard showed how this logic works in practice. "Fascism is imbued with violence and secures itself politically through the use or threat of it," writes Lennard, quoting from *Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance*, a 2015 book written by anti-fascist blogger "Malatesta" (Errico Malatesta was an Italian anarchist committed to revolutionary violence). As a result, there can be little question of the necessity of "counter-violence" — "as in Ferguson, as in Baltimore, as in Watts, as in counter-riots against the Ku Klux Klan, as in slave revolts." There are a great many questions ignored here — to take one obvious example, whether the riots that consumed Baltimore in late April 2015 are in any meaningful way comparable to nineteenth-century slave rebellions — but consider for now just the use of "counter-violence." It depends entirely on accepting the premise that Donald Trump is a fascist. Since fascism is "imbued with violence," a violent response to the Trump administration is therefore necessary.

This sort of reasoning, such as it is, gets a more extensive workout in Emmett Rensin's "From Mother Jones to Middlebury: The Problem and Promise of Political Violence in Trump's America," published in *Foreign Policy* in March. Rensin purports to assay recent left-wing political violence, but his clear if unstated purpose is to defend it. According to him, questions of ethics — *Is it right to commit violence?* — or of tactics — *Is it wise to commit violence?* — are unhelpful; what matters is *why* political violence happens. The answer, he says, is "intolerable pressure" on the lives of "the poor and oppressed"; "the intolerable pressure of a hateful and fearful world is always waiting to explode."

This romantic pabulum conceals a salient fact: The victims and perpetrators of recent violence are hardly who Rensin makes them out to be. "The poor and oppressed" are not students at Claremont McKenna College (est. 2017–18 tuition: $52,825), and Muhammad Ashraf, the Muslim immigrant who owned the limousine burnt out on Inauguration Day, is not "the company" stamping its vulgar capitalist boot upon the downtrodden. Rensin sidesteps this flaw in his analysis by offering a taxonomy of violence that, conveniently, theorizes away both leftist responsibility and non-"oppressed" victims: According to him, there is violence perpetrated by the state — e.g., drone strikes, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers, and the killing of Michael Brown (generally wicked); there is violence perpetrated by right-wingers that is tacitly endorsed by the state — e.g., lynch mobs and white-supremacist murderer Dylann Roof (always wicked); and there is violence that "explodes" from among the "oppressed" (understandable, and who are we to judge, really?).

What Lennard and Rensin are saying, underneath the layers of refurbished revolutionary cant, is that Donald Trump is a grave threat that justifies abrogating our laws against arson and assault — just like all of those other grave threats, from chattel slavery to Ferguson. They are not so bold as to come right out and say it, but they are, in the final analysis, simply claiming that people who think like them should be exempt from the law's constraints, and that people who do not think like them should not receive the law's protections. In an article published shortly after Inauguration Day, Lennard complained that prosecutors had brought up about 200 D.C. rioters on felony rioting charges.

We have been through this before.

"During an eighteen-month period in 1971 and 1972, the FBI reported more than 2,500 bombings on U.S. soil, nearly five a day." So notes Bryan Burrough in his 2015 book *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence*, which chronicles the 15-year reign of terror, idealism, and ineptitude of radical left-wing groups such as the Weather Underground, the Black and Symbionese Liberation Armies, and others that began in July 1969 with a bomb in Manhattan and ended in April 1985 with the arrest of the last members of the United Freedom Front in Norfolk, Va. Writes Burrough: "Radical violence was so deeply woven into the fabric of 1970s America that many citizens, especially in New York and other hard-hit cities, accepted it as part of daily life." When a bomb exploded at a Bronx movie theater on May 1, 1970, police tried to clear the building, but patrons refused to leave, demanding to see the rest of their film.

Sophisticated justifications for violence were part and parcel of this fever. Leftist radicals were immersed in revolutionary literature — Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara, Malcolm X's *Autobiography* — and those texts were candid. In 1963, Frantz Fanon published *The Wretched of the Earth*, the first sentence of which read: "National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event." He continued, inverting Christian teaching:

> In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists. This determination to have the last move up to the front, to have them clamber up (too quickly, say some) the famous echelons of an organized society, can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence.

The preface to the original edition of *The Wretched of the Earth* was written by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was even more bullish about violence: "To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone," Sartre suggested. "There remain a dead man and a free man."

Among the dead men was Frank Connor, a 33-year-old banker from New Jersey, killed on January 24, 1975, when FALN, a radical group dedicated to Puerto Rican independence, detonated a bomb in the historic Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan. An interview with his son, Joseph, appears toward the end of *Days of Rage*. About his father's murderers, Joseph concludes: "They appointed themselves my father's judge, jury, and executioner. He represented something they didn't like, so they decided they had the right to kill him." Moreover, many like them were excused — Weather Underground bombers Bill Ayers and his wife, Bernardine Dohrn, became celebrated academics — because their violence had served the "correct" politics.

Today's leftists are more gun-shy than their predecessors, but the differences are a matter of degree. Under the aegis of "anti-fascism," leftist thugs have appointed themselves adjudicators of the fates of Richard Spencer, Heather Mac Donald, the limo owner or Trump voter — anyone they "don't like" — and in this lawless realm, whatever crimes Antifa commit are not crimes, and their victims are not victims.

One senses, too, that they enjoy the simple frisson of violence. When Lennard writes in her post–Inauguration Day essay that Spencer's getting punched in the face was "pure kinetic beauty," she is on a spectrum with Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, who raped white women as an "insurrectionary act," and Dohrn, who gushed over the artistry of Charles Manson's murders. ("Dig it! First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into the pig Tate's stomach! Wild!")

If the first 100 days of his administration are any indication, Donald Trump may well be a fairly conventional president, except in his personal conduct — which, even then, is likely to be more Berlusconi than Mussolini. He is, though no one left of center would dare admit it, arguably the leftmost Republican president ever elected, and his closest advisers — his daughter and son-in-law — were until a few minutes ago lifelong Democrats. But the sort of people who join Antifa are not the sort who interest themselves in such details. No fanatics are.

The impulse toward destruction is deep-seated. Kirkpatrick Sale, in his authoritative history *SDS: The Rise and Development of the Students for a Democratic Society* (1973), writes:

> Revolution: how had it come to that? . . . There was a primary sense, begun by no more than a reading of the morning papers and developed through the new perspectives and new analyses available to the Movement now, that the evils *in* America were the evils *of* America, inextricably a part of the total system. . . . Clearly something drastic would be necessary to eradicate those evils and alter that system.

That describes far more than just the violent fringe of 1970s leftism. It is the stated position, today, of many Antifa and Occupiers and Black Lives Matter supporters, and it is the unacknowledged assumption of many progressive Democrats who would never throw a stone. It is the expressed belief, too, of many who embrace the label "alt-right." It is a weed that, for 50 years, has been taking root.

The natural and necessary institutions — chief among them civil society and the law — that make it possible for people to live together peacefully and prosperously require a degree of freedom. Inevitably, grifters will swindle and demagogues will charm. But those determined to subvert these institutions fail to see, or refuse to see, that the most likely alternative to the principle of equality under law is a form of "domination and oppression" worse than anything they currently oppose.

The remedy to outbursts of political turmoil is not to wantonly tear down what fragile order exists, or to impose some new, ill-conceived order by force. Power, at least in the long run, does not grow out of the barrel of a gun; Mao was wrong. Legitimate and stable political power is rooted in the healthful loyalties that temper destructive political passions. Rightly ordered affections — toward God, country, and one another — promote the civic friendship in which citizens work side by side to promote one another's best interests, and by which inevitable disputes can be resolved with a minimum of conflict. When Lincoln urged that "we are not enemies, but friends," he was stating a necessary condition of the American republic.

The Antifa ideology can produce only enemies.

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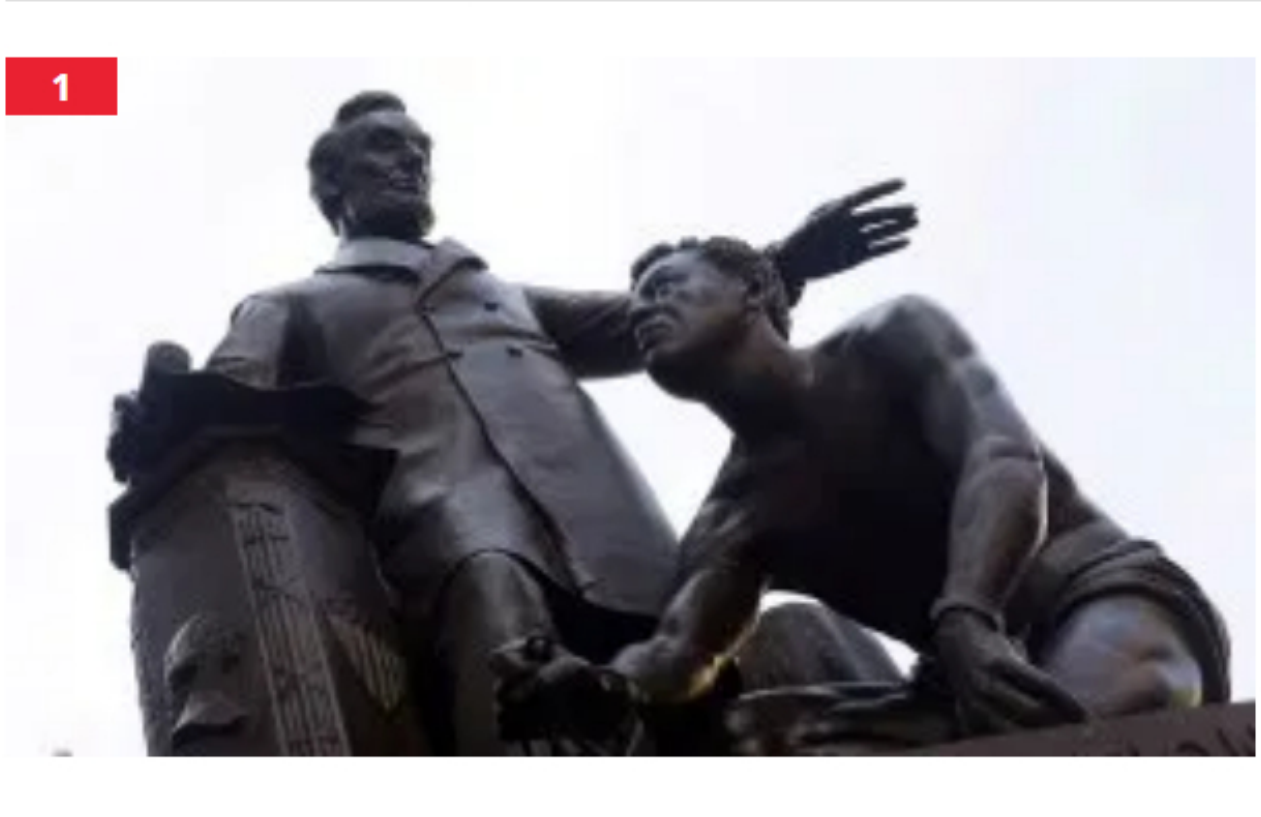

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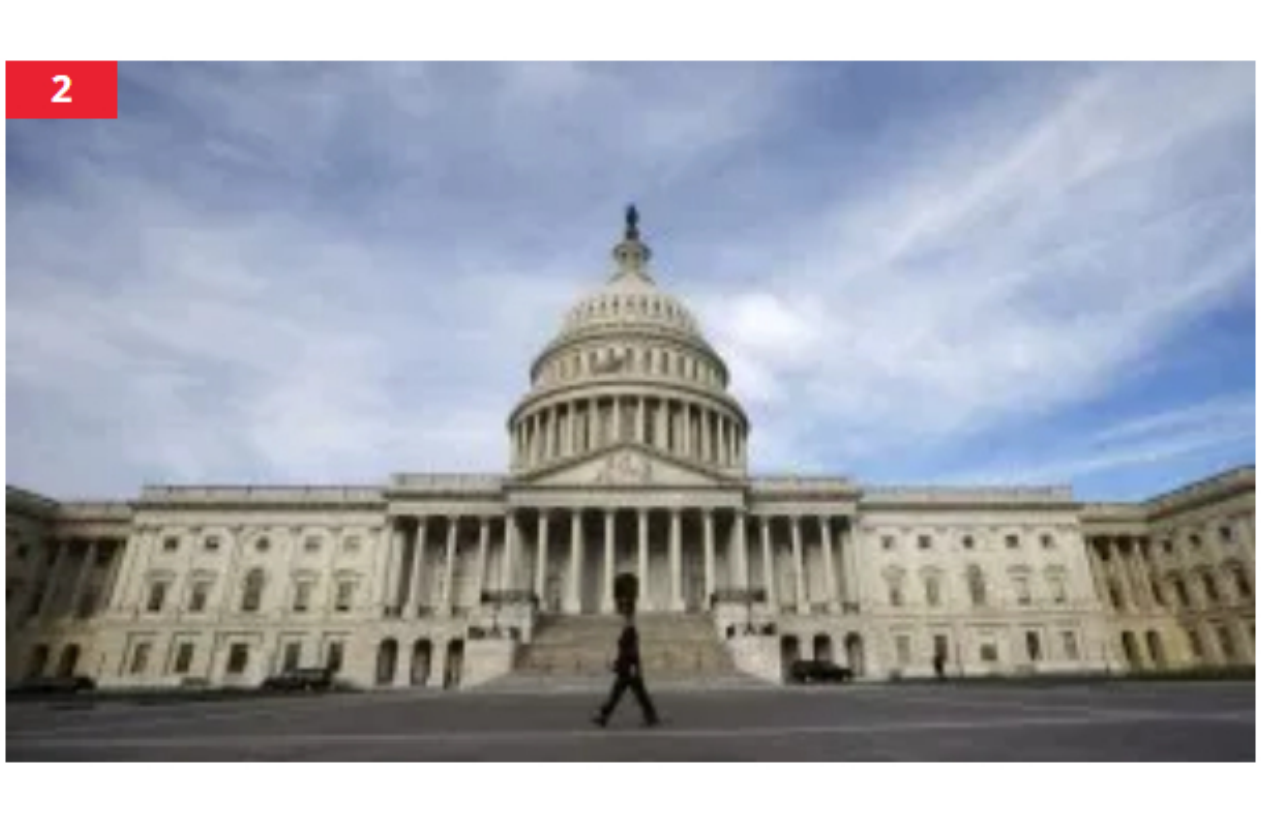

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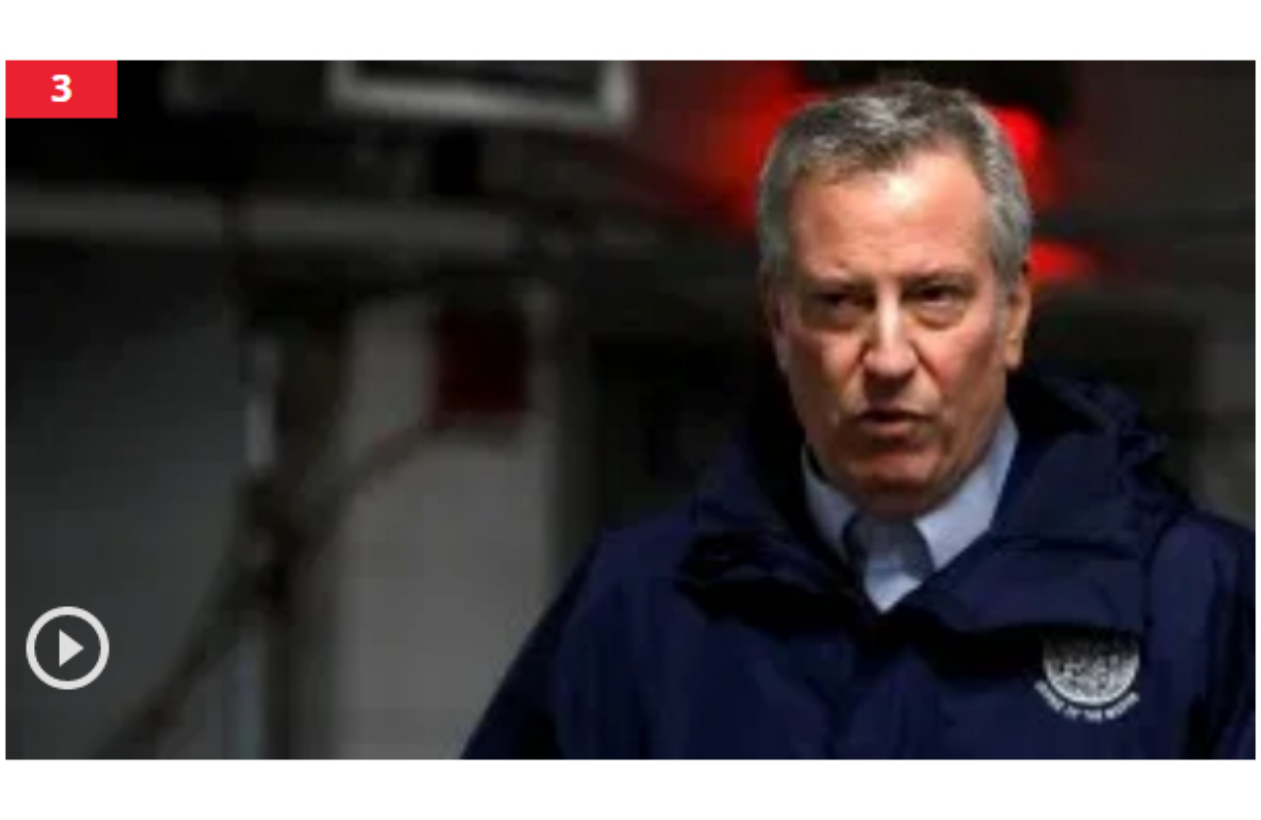

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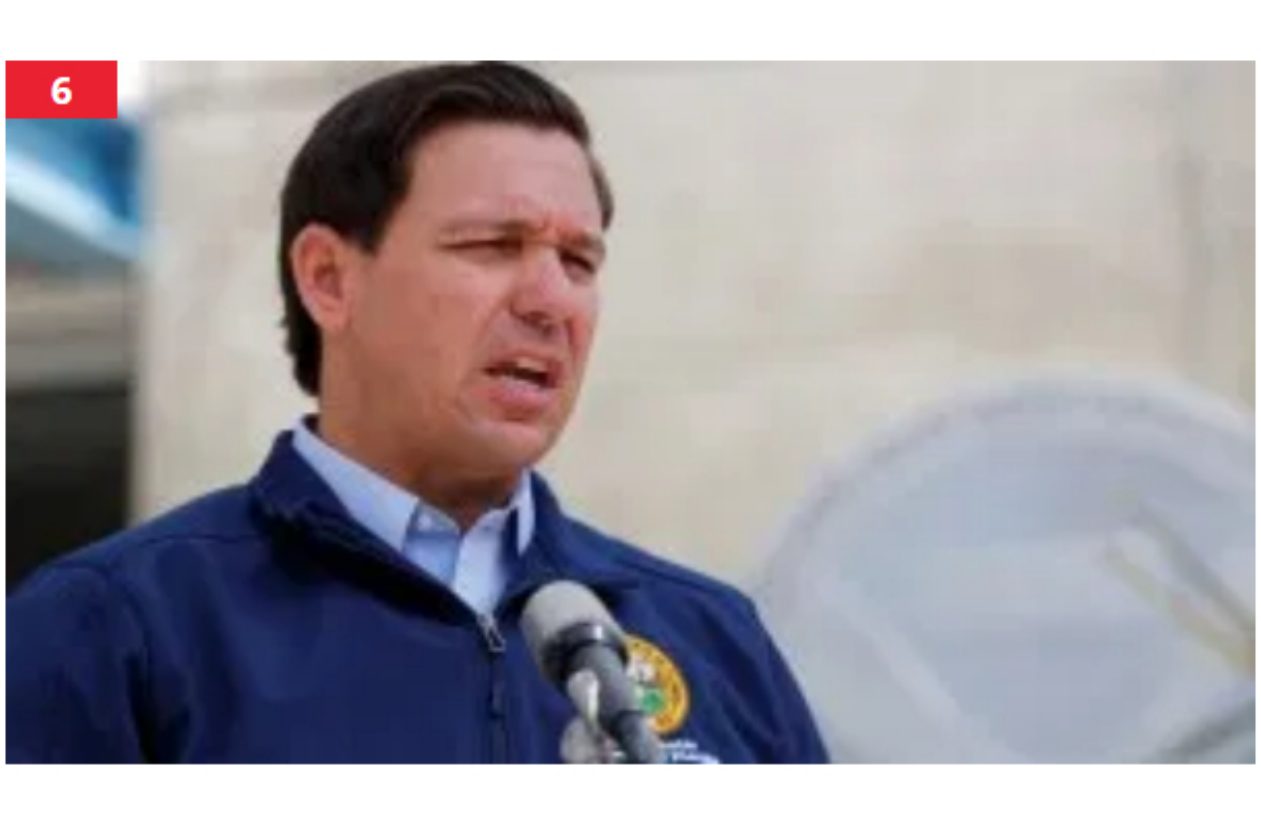

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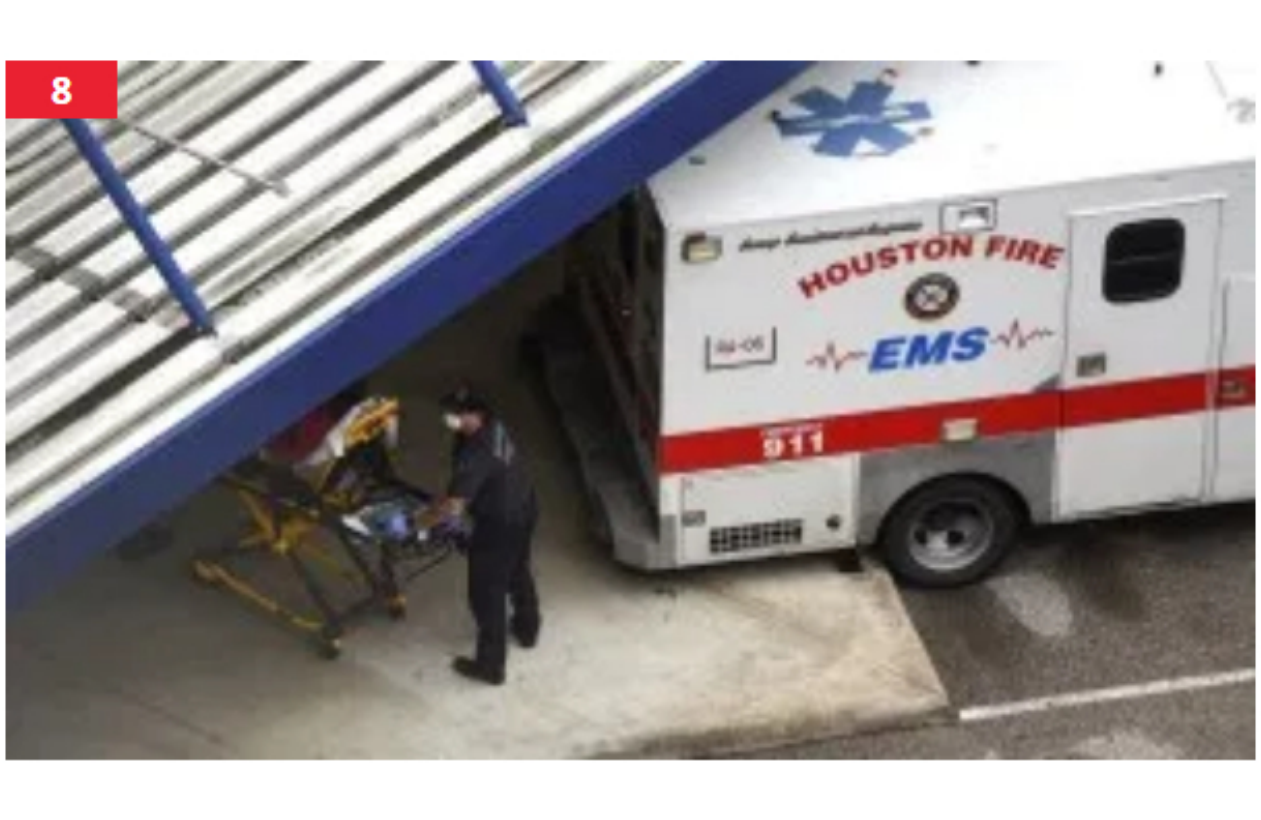

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